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SUBJECT: DANCING WITH THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Econoff accompanied Standing Deputy Prime Minister Somsavat Lengsavad, along with a group of senior diplomats, on a 36-hour set-piece "study tour" of two districts in Sayabouri province. Thanks to a focus on export crops, primarily corn, the districts appear to be doing well economically. However, the most interesting aspect of the trip was watching how the Lao Government, at a senior level, entertains foreigners. The Deputy Prime Minister likes to dance. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Econoff accompanied Standing Deputy Prime Minister (and former longtime Foreign Minister) Somsavat Lengsavad, along with a group of senior diplomats, on a 36-hour set-piece "study tour" of Sayabouri province's Paklai and Kenethao districts. The trip shed some light on the situation in the province, and was even more interesting as a glimpse into how this Communist country is run.

¶3. (SBU) After a long trip primarily through Thailand (Lao roads not being reliable during the rainy season), the diplomatic entourage, consisting mostly of ambassadors, was directed from one staged visit to the next. During one break, the government hosted the entourage for lunch--or so everyone thought. A few days after returning from the trip, each of the diplomats received a bill. During a typical stop, a large convoy of Land Cruisers pulled into a rundown governmental compound. A line of local residents waved Lao flags and smiled. Traditionally dressed women put flowers around the necks of the visitors and filled their hands with Lao gift bags woven from locally grown cotton, wrapped them in cotton scarves, and, in one case, put bright orange and yellow cowboy hats on their heads. The diplomats trooped into a meeting room, where the local mayor gave a speech, passably translated into English.

¶4. (SBU) The speeches followed a standard format -- how many families in the district, their ethnic groups, the number of women, number of poor people, types of animals raised, development success stories, and invariably a request for assistance. The Deputy Prime Minister would then make a speech. In all cases he was completely at ease, smoothly interacting with the local politicians, praising them for their successes, reminding them where they should improve, and offering benefits, such as expansion of the electrical grid.

¶5. (SBU) From an economic perspective it appears that the two districts the group visited in Xayaboury are doing well, apparently because they have moved away from subsistence rice farming and are focused on export crops. Corn is the primary crop, growing almost everywhere over the rolling hills and primarily planted not in small family plots but in large areas using tractors. According to the DPM, Sayabouri is the only province in Laos to embrace corn, and it has benefited. Two Ambassadors who had accompanied the DPM on a similar, but

week-long, trip two years ago noted the increase in concrete homes and the almost universal use of permanent roofing instead of thatch for homes and businesses. They were impressed with the overnight accommodations as well. During the previous visit the walls of the government guesthouse came alive with worms seeking refuge from heavy rain outside. With the exception of the unpaved roads, Sayabouri did not look strikingly different from neighboring northern Thailand.

16. (SBU) The most interesting aspect of the trip, however, was watching how the GOL, at a senior level, entertains foreigners. The Deputy Prime Minister likes to sing, he likes to dance, and he is entranced when foreign diplomats (particularly diplomatic corps dean Karen Tan of Singapore, who was scheduled to complete her assignment four days after the trip) can be "encouraged" to sing and dance (Lao style) too. Watching the DPM belt out Lao songs to the pulsating beat of a digital accordion, accompanied by a red-faced Johnny Walker Gold fan screaming out "rotate, rotate, rotate" (to encourage the couples doing the Lamvong, the traditional Lao circle dance) is an unforgettable experience. When Mr. Walker invites the Indian Ambassador and his wife to sing, and then begins to dance an original composition apparently inspired by Bollywood, one takes notice. Watch out for the Lao delegation at the next ASEAN Ministerial.

HUSO